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THE NEW YORK BUILDING TRADES PARALYSIS OF 1903.

ABOUT four years ago the wave of large capitalistic organization in this country reached and passed its highest point. Today the labor-organization movement appears to be forging to a similar climax—a climax fraught with critical significance both for the larger interests of labor and for the general industrial situation in which workingmen, employers, and all classes are vitally concerned. For many years wage-earners have been organizing to resist the encroachments of capital; now we have the singular spectacle of employers associating to resist arbitrary abuses of power and domination of industry by close-banded and militant labor. Narrow intolerance on one side, rashness and bad leadership on the other, have surrounded the controversy with a general atmosphere of demoralization, the only encouraging feature in which is the possibility that the more vicious elements may be gathered into the storm clouds now forming, so that when the tempest is over the industrial atmosphere may be purified for a long time to come.

Few of the recent labor contests have been more depressing, few more thoroughly typical of the low plane to which industrial controversy can be dragged by the intrusion of disreputable influences, than the building-trades paralysis which affected the metropolis during the greater part of 1903. This controversy involved no large question of the rights of workingmen, no issue of wages or hours, not even a dispute over recognition of organized labor. It began in local wrangles over certain abuses, took larger shape in violation of agreements on the part of important unions, was aggravated by a needlessly intolerant attitude of the employers, and gradually centered about the reckless leadership of a blatant demagogue whose power for evil was as great, apparently, as the secret of his influence is amazing to everybody not acquainted with the inner facts of the situation. To speak of Samuel Parks's "power of evil" in

the past tense may be misleading. The man himself, serving a two and one-half years' term in Sing Sing prison, is indeed removed from the scene of action, but the Parks spirit, the Parks type of labor-union methods and ideas, are not in Sing Sing, and can be eliminated only through less drastic and far more tedious measures. Not even industrial peace followed his disappearance, since the iron-workers embarked in a strike of national proportions as late as November.

Parks and his following represent the standards and methods prevalent in the early days of the labor movement in this country—an era that stamped unionism with a burden of odium it has never been able to escape. It is not a case of degeneration. The Parks element is the survival of a lower type of labor-union methods in the midst of conditions that have slowly become superior. The particular body of workingmen Parks represented has never been at a higher level. Structural iron-work is a comparatively new branch of the building industry, and demands a class of crude, rough labor. The main requisites are muscle and endurance. The heavy beams and girders must be swung into place, fitted and riveted, the foremen supplying most of the brain-work. For the chief part these workers have been recruited from the ranks of day laborers; they are largely illiterate and the dangerous, exhausting nature of their employment further develops a rough and reckless type of character—precisely the type adapted to the leadership of a man like Parks, similarly rough and reckless. Not all would answer to this description, to be sure; but it is notably true of the dominating element, for whose excesses the more conservative group (and, it must be admitted, the less active in shaping union policy) have to suffer jointly in the public eye. That Parks fought for better wage and hour conditions for his group, and with some success, was enough in their eyes to cover the multitude of sins. "What's the odds how he gets his pile?" said one of his followers at the time of his first conviction for extortion; "he gets it out of the bosses, he doesn't get it out of us." And when Parks was sent to Sing Sing, in August, Housesmiths' Local Union No. 2, of which he is the walking delegate or

"business agent" met and enthusiastically voted to continue his salary of \$48 per week, even though he should have to serve the entire sentence of two and one-half years.

All this is simply the Tammany idea transferred to the industrial field. Parks was the typical ward heeler, and the ward heeler's followers seldom worry if he makes himself rich at the expense of city contractors or the city treasury, so long as he is liberal in his distribution of largess. No doubt the majority would prefer that he get his living honestly, but his "good qualities" are in very close evidence and very practical, and buy him an easy pardon for the others. It is not that they love clean hands less, but full hands more; and it is only just to recognize the influence of necessity and dull monotony when this choice is presented to some of the least-favored groups of the wage-earning population, *en masse*. But it is exactly this kind of pot-logic that makes the success both of the political and of the labor demagogue. Here we find Parks and all of his kind.

It has been reported that this man's record as a labor leader in New York includes the ordering of more than five thousand strikes in the last seven years—an absurd exaggeration. Probably a few hundred would cover all of any real importance. However, he has not been idle in this respect by any means, nor in a practical solicitude for his own pocket. The interrelation of both these lines of activity appears in his systematic campaign of extortion, laid bare last June, and resulting in his first conviction on the specific charge of obtaining \$200 from an employer by threatening a strike. That he was able to attend and virtually browbeat the September convention of the structural iron-workers in Kansas City was due to his release from prison on a "certificate of reasonable doubt," permitting a new trial. Extortion of a "fine" from the Tiffany studios, for past unfriendliness to labor, is the particular offense which again took him behind the bars.

Parks's defense was that booty obtained in these ways was not for his personal benefit, but for the union cause. What is the true inwardness of this? Take, for example, the case of

the Hecla Iron Works, of Brooklyn. Parks admitted receiving some \$2,000 from this establishment in April, 1902, as the price of ordering off a strike, but claimed that the money was used for union purposes. But the evidence in that instance, as well as in other cases of extortion by walking delegates, showed that the "union purposes" for the most part consisted in dividing a portion of the spoils, in greater or less sums, among lieutenants and sub-lieutenants, to the extent necessary to preserve loyalty, the process sometimes extending to members of the rank and file.

In behalf of Parks it is claimed that through his efforts the wages of housesmiths have been increased from about \$2.50 to \$4.50 per day, in the last four or five years. Possibly 25 per cent. of this might be credited to Parks's exertions; the rest came with the current economic drift. An unprecedented amount of construction of new "skyscrapers," extensive public improvements, tunnel- and bridge-building on a vast scale, not only in New York, but throughout the country, have created such a demand for structural iron-workers that contractors have had to bid for help, and in consequence wages inevitably rose. Moreover, the general upward trend of wages and cost of living during the current period of abounding prosperity undoubtedly stimulated the movement in this special quarter.

Some workingmen declare, on the other hand, that their net income was actually greater with the previous lower wage rates than it is now with the losses occasioned by numerous and prolonged strikes. Probably there is considerable truth in this; but so far as the hardships of the immediate situation are concerned, much exaggerated nonsense has gone out. Too much credence should not be given to the reports of widespread suffering, hundreds of "starving families," and the like. A large number of the belligerent housesmiths are not now in New York at all. From the beginning of the lockout they have been scattering far and wide, getting work in other places; and such as have done this are of course not drawing on the union's relief funds. This gradual thinning out of available men in New York adds to the difficulty of resuming work on a large scale.

The local complications date as far back as February, 1903. One of the earliest disputes, over some minor issue, occurred during the foundation work on the Hotel Belmont, which is to stand at the corner of Forty-Second Street and Fourth Avenue, opposite the Grand Central Station. This mammoth structure is to have twenty-two stories, with foundations nearly seventy feet below the level of Forty-First Street. It is to cost \$4,500,000 when completed, and about \$2,000,000 of labor and material is represented in the work already accomplished—to which relatively little has been added during the entire past year. Not to mention smaller enterprises, it is estimated that some fifty to seventy-five other giant structures either projected or partially completed were halted in the general "tie-up;" while almost seventy-five thousand school children were put in half-time classes in September, largely owing to the delays on new school buildings under construction by the reform administration.

One of the first serious disputes grew out of the practice by portable engineers, employed in steel framework construction, of charging representatives of other trades a separate and exorbitant price for hoisting their materials, such as plumbers' supplies, engines for other contractors, etc., often doubling their regular wages in this way without any extra labor time, simply through having control for the time being of the hoisting engines and apparatus. This custom having grown to an intolerable abuse, the Employers' Association just then forming (last spring) decided to forbid it, and the engineers struck. Thereupon the Housesmiths' Union, although working under an agreement during the life of which they were bound not to strike, violated that agreement and struck in sympathy with the engineers. This Employers' Association, formed for the purpose of bringing the interminable strife and delays in the building industry to an end, then took up a plan of arbitration, formed in general on the lines of an agreement which has been in force for many years between the mason builders' association and the bricklayers. In their present form the more important items of this arbitration arrangement are as follows:

(1) In general the employers and employees of each trade are organized. . . . (2) Where an agreement exists between employers and employees, all disputes in relation thereto shall be settled by a board of arbitration with an umpire, if necessary. The decision of said board or umpire shall be final. Should either side to the dispute fail to select an umpire, or fail to abide by the decision of the umpire, the dispute in question shall be referred to the General Board of Arbitration within twenty-four hours after such failure or refusal. The question of sympathetic strikes or lockouts, and all questions as to the jurisdiction of trades must be referred to the General Board of Arbitration, it being agreed and understood that such kinds of work as have been heretofore recognized as being in the possession of a trade are not subjects for arbitration. (3) Each association represented in the Building Trades Employers' Association of the city of New York shall elect two arbitrators, who shall serve for not less than six months. (4) Each union, the employers of which are represented in the Building Trades Employers' Association shall elect two arbitrators, who shall serve for not less than six months, and who shall be actively engaged in their trades for an employer in Greater New York at the time of their election. (5) The arbitrators from the unions shall not be business agents. (6) From this body of general arbitrators not less than four, two from the Employers' Association and two from the employees' unions, shall constitute a Special Arbitration Board. They shall meet within twenty-four hours when notified so to do by the general secretary. . . . (8) The unions as a whole or as a single union shall not order any strike against a member of the Building Trades Employers' Association collectively or individually, nor shall any number of union men leave the work of a member of the Building Trades Employers' Association, nor shall any member of the Building Trades Employers' Association lock out his employees before the matter in dispute has been brought before the General Arbitration Board and settled. (9) Complaints shall be first addressed to the general secretary of the Arbitration Board, who shall be a paid employee, and by him be referred to the executive committee of the General Arbitration Board composed of an equal number of employers and employees, and it shall be their duty at once to organize a special arbitration board to decide the point at issue. (10) It shall be the privilege of any union or member of the Employers' Association to select from all the general arbitrators the individuals they desire to act for them, but no general arbitrator can act when the dispute is occurring in the trade which he represents. (11) The general arbitrators must be given power by the interest they are acting for. (12) . . . Both sides agree to abide by the vote of the majority of the board or the decision of an umpire. . . . (15) The members of this association agree to employ members of the trades unions only, directly or indirectly, when parties to this agreement. It is understood, however, that in any case where a trades union is unable to provide sufficient workmen, the employer or employers in that trade may hire workmen, not

members, who shall become members of the union, if competent. That after the date of the signing of this agreement no union shall become a party to this agreement without the consent of the executive committee. That the matter of supplying sufficient workmen shall be left to the Arbitration Board of the individual trade to be governed by its trade conditions, but that in case of continued failure on the part of the unions to supply sufficient workmen, any member of the Building Trades Employers' Association may refer the matter to the General Arbitration Board for settlement. (16) The wages now paid in the skilled and unskilled trades shall not be reduced nor the hours increased for one year from the date of the general acceptance of this agreement. In any difficulty arising in the unskilled trades, they may, through the mechanics of that particular trade, have representation in the General Arbitration Board.

This plan was adopted at joint conferences between the Employers' Association and various labor unions, July 3 and 9. Although it provides against lockouts, except, presumably, where arbitration fails, the method of enforcing its adoption was virtually a lockout. And at this point the Employers' Association comes in for a large share of blame for the slow progress the arbitration proposal has made—and this quite regardless of the merits of the scheme itself. It was presented in an arbitrary, tactless manner, as an ultimatum to be forced on the men whether or no. The plan was originally made public by the employers several weeks before the July 3 conference, and in a form materially less favorable to the unions. It was announced in a circular letter to all the building-trades unions, including even the bricklayers, who were working peaceably under their arbitration agreement with the mason builders, and without a suggestion of trouble. Obviously there was no fairness, tact, or reason in locking out these men, yet they were included in the general announcement that work would cease until the new general agreement was signed. And Mr. Charles L. Eidlitz, president of the Employers' Association, declared in substance that the workingmen could accept this plan or starve.

Such a method of presentation naturally spread resentment among the unions; the gratifying surprise is that so many of them rose above any narrow or personal view of the case and indorsed the agreement for the sake of the common good and the larger interests both of labor and of the public—a course of

high-minded conduct to which adequate appreciation has not been given. More than thirty of the old unions have signed, including nine unions of bricklayers, the Brotherhood of Carpenters, Amalgamated Painters, Brotherhood of Painters, plasterers, plumbers, steamfitters, machinists, and others; besides some half-dozen new organizations that have been formed under the arbitration agreement. These last include a new union of house-smiths which numbers perhaps about two thousand members, while the old Housesmiths' Union No. 2 (Parks's union) had upwards of three thousand, five hundred on the rolls. Some twenty unions have not signed, these including the main body of house-smiths, the Amalgamated Carpenters, Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers, portable engineers, stone cutters, and others. It was Lawrence Murphy, former treasurer of this Stone Cutters' Union, by the way, who was recently convicted and sentenced to five years and six months in state's prison for embezzling several thousand dollars extorted from building contractors under the blackmail compulsion of threatened strikes.

In spite of wide resentment among the unions against the employers' attitude, it is probable nearly all of them would have signed the arbitration agreement had it not been for the aggressive warfare kept up by the housesmiths and certain other groups of similar type, under the influence of Parks. It is not that all these other unions liked the man or approved of his methods, but for the time being they regarded him as voicing a just protest against the forcing of the arbitration scheme, and were willing to stand aside and await the outcome.

It has been freely charged on almost every hand that there is an explanation under the surface, much more important than the personal influence of the man himself, for the reckless audacity of Parks's continuous strike performances and antagonism to practically all proposals that seemed to lead toward permanent peace. This phase involves what is supposed to be a definite policy on the part of one of the largest contracting corporations in New York, the George A. Fuller Company. The methods of this establishment are somewhat of an innovation in the building industry, in that it contracts for and carries out under one super-

intendence almost the entire series of operations in any given piece of construction it undertakes, from the foundation up. Nearly all other building firms let out many branches of the work to sub-contractors; and for the most part the class of concerns that do this are in the Employers' Association. The Fuller Company was not a member of that association. In the past it has had less trouble with labor unions than most of its rivals, and it is even credited with having had a private personal understanding with Parks under which its work was supposed to be going on smoothly during the present controversy, while others, with almost the sole exception of the American Bridge Company, were blocked. The American Bridge Company has a regular agreement with Housesmiths' Union No. 2, but is not suspected of having any partiality for Parks. Its work has been held up wherever the chief or other associated contractors on any given piece of construction are members of the Employers' Association, since Parks's men, of course, refuse to work under the employers' arbitration plan. But the Fuller Company, it is asserted, having no sub-contracts to let and no connection with the Employers' Association, made Parks useful to it in a double sense. Its own work was kept manned with help, while every rival job on which Parks ordered a strike and crippled the contractor might be a plum for the Fuller basket.

It happens that at one time Parks was in the employ of the Fuller Company as a workman, and in his first trial for extortion it was sought to introduce testimony that he was still carried on the rolls of the Fuller Company as a paid agent to foment trouble throughout the building industry. This has yet to be proved, if indeed it can be proved at all. The writer of the severest attack that has yet been made, in a recent popular magazine, remarks on this point that he "could not find any specific evidence, even from the company's worst enemies, of this dastardly sort of warfare."

And it may be stated as not true that the Fuller Company has been exempt from trouble throughout the controversy. Its supposed independence of sub-contracts appears to be more of an ideal as yet than a fully accomplished reality; and wherever

any of its minor operations have been in the hands of sub-contractors who are connected with the employers' association the Fuller Company has been seriously crippled. In fact, later events would indicate that this establishment was one of the chief sufferers. A large part of its force was laid off last fall, important contracts in prospect were relinquished to other bidders, and the Fuller Company itself has actually become a member of the association of employers it was supposed to be ruining. There were rumors, for a time, that the United States Realty Corporation, of which the Fuller Company is the construction department, might abandon that branch of its operations entirely. This action appears not to be probable, but, in view of the developments, the elaborate and somewhat sensational efforts to find the starting-point of the whole embroglio in the machinations of this particular establishment appear largely fanciful, even frivolous. This much may be said in the interest of accuracy down to date, and with no intent of pleading a special defense of interests which may have much else to answer for, whatever their part in the present trouble. Circumstances may yet arise tending to confirm some or all of the charges that have been made; but if a mutual interest indeed existed between Parks and his union, and this company, it would seem quite as possible that the condition was one into which matters drifted through natural causes as that it was the result of corrupt design. The wide range of operations carried on, the smaller relative amount of complication with sub-contractors, and the habitually liberal policy toward labor, all would tend to give any establishment a favorable position in its relations with labor, regardless of secret manipulations. Not even this combination of advantages, however, appears to have secured immunity in the present instance.

There can be no question, nevertheless, that the temptation to corrupt the walking delegate as the easiest way of getting rid of him, to buy immunity from labor demands, and even to "play off" labor leaders in various ways against rival employers, has come to be a real factor in our industrial life, increasing with the tightening stress of competition. Just who yields to this tempta-

tion, and when, is not so easy to decide. It is not always and necessarily the large concern. It was a group of independent contractors, according to a further showing by the writer above referred to, that bribed the entrance of a new union of painters and decorators into the New York field, and then made a secret agreement with the newcomers to work for less wages than they were pledged to their fellow-union to demand.

The final outcome of the situation is not yet fully in sight. The group of new unions formed with the co-operation of the employers' association offers a convenient magnet for deserters from the strikers' ranks, and if the struggle should be long prolonged the magnet may prove all-powerful. Certain it is that the building industry in the metropolis is desperately demoralized, and in all probability resumption of work will be a gradual process, accompanied by equally gradual elimination of the old basis of relations with labor and substitution of a new *modus operandi*, with arbitration for its keynote. Probably there will be no dramatic finish, as in the coal and steel strikes; no grand "declaring off" and beginning all over again; no specific calendar date on which it will be possible to say the trouble was settled and operations all along the line suddenly resumed. A silent transformation is going on. Its progress will be hard to follow. Perhaps in a year it will be possible to say that entirely new conditions are here, and state what they are. But not yet.

From the standpoint of labor, the moral effect of the New York struggle, as of all disputes where similar elements are allowed to control, has been most unfortunate. Very largely the impression that went out from the situation was that Parks virtually represented New York labor unionism and its present tendencies. It is true he exercised a control over affairs altogether out of proportion to his recognized leadership among labor men, but this is owing to the peculiarities of the building industry. The housesmiths happen to hold the key to all active operations in that none of the other divisions of work can proceed except in the wake of the steel structural work. When the housesmiths are idle, everything else is blocked. That is why Parks, by holding his union aloof, could appear to dominate the

entire industry. But that this man or his active followers represented the present character or tendencies of labor-unionism in the metropolis, or throughout the country, is far from the truth. The labor movement is entitled to be judged by the solid, permanent elements that underlie it, rather than by the surface accidents of vicious leadership.

Parks is not typical. Neither, for that matter, are John Mitchell, Samuel Gompers, Frank P. Sargent, Henry White, Samuel B. Donnelly, Robert Neidig, and the like; but they are much more nearly so. Parks's union had no recognized affiliation with other bodies of organized labor in the metropolis, other than that its walking delegate, an office it has recently abolished, was a member of the old board of building trades. It is not represented in the local Central Labor Union, and has no connection with the American Federation of Labor. The reserve sentiment of New York workingmen was impressively shown, moreover, on Labor Day, when the usual contingent of from 25,000 to 50,000 in the labor parade was reduced to less than 10,000, all the rest refusing to march with Parks. And it is positively stated that a considerable number of the supposed "house-smiths" in line of march were not housesmiths at all, but were specially recruited political camp followers of ex-Chief of Police William S. Devery, who rode with Parks at the head of the procession. The aggregation was hissed all along the line. Even among the housesmiths, of the country at large, although Parks seemed in complete control of the last national convention, his influence was not all-powerful, since he lost his chief point in failing to prevent the re-election of President Buchanan.

The conditions represented in this struggle are not confined to New York. A crisis is being forced upon the whole labor movement by the arrogant excesses of its least reputable, but still powerful elements. If wiser counsels gain control—and promptly—it may ward off the concerted attack by employers' associations on labor-unionism in general, which the immediate situation promises. In the main, nothing more difficult is demanded either of the unions or of the employers, whether in the local disturbance or in the larger problem that is gathering

acuteness throughout the country, than a fair-minded disposition to make industrial peace on a just and progressive basis the supreme ideal, supremely worth the dethronement of "grafters" and demagogues, suppression of intolerance and corrupt dealing on both sides, and of all merely "pride" issues. For the labor unions—and for a considerable number of capitalist representatives—such an attitude when adopted will mean a notably higher status of respect, confidence, and friendly co-operation on the part of a much-tried and nearly exasperated community.

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